Life Among the Ruins: Mary Wollstonecraft and Mary Shelley on Human History and Animal Futures

For Mary Wollstonecraft, remembering the past and imagining the future were both uniquely human capacities. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft describes "the power of reflecting on the past, and darting the keen eye of contemplation into futurity" as "the grand privilege of man."[1] For Wollstonecraft, the uniquely human powers of imagination and memory are deeply connected to both an emphatic belief in human perfectibility and an optimism about the future. The metaphysical comprehensions and forward-thinking capacities of the imagination enable humans to build toward an improved future. This future-facing optimism also relies on a contemplation of the past, as reflection on human achievements becomes a way to imagine future prospects. Yet it is at this connection point between memory and imagination that the clear distinction between humans and animals often begins to break down. Troubled by memories of her own embodied animality, Wollstonecraft's belief in human perfectibility is occasionally shaken, compromising her visions for the future.

In the writing of Wollstonecraft's daughter, neither memory nor imagination are the "grand privilege of man" at all. Indeed, the moments when Wollstonecraft's optimism and assurance in human perfectibility are briefly shaken are the moments that Mary Shelley draws on most in her own visions for the future. Combining both the despair and the hope of her mother's works into something new, she looks forward to a future in which optimism doesn't have to be dependent on the unique capacities of the human imagination. In this

[1] Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman, with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792), ed. Deidre Shauna Lynch (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009), 159.

essay, I consider how both authors' visions of the future are informed by memories of human animality. In doing so, I turn to texts in which each writer considers the relationship between memory and imagination in particular depth – Wollstonecraft's volume of travel writing and most openly personal work, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), and Shelley's futuristic plague novel, *The Last Man* (1826). Both works are generally well-recognised for their grave visions and existential despair, but both are also characterised by moments of unusual hope, each signifying a departure from the usual places where hope is sought by each writer. Ostensibly a deeply pessimistic book, the hope that *The Last Man* rests on is a hope definitively *not* based in human exceptionalism. This essay considers how Shelley draws creaturely hope from Wollstonecraft's anthropocentric despair, and how both authors look forward to a future haunted by humankind's animal past.

Increasing attention was given to human memory throughout the eighteenth century, with John Locke declaring that "personal identity" depends on how far "any intelligent being can repeat the *idea* of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first" in his influential *Essay on Human Understanding*.[2] This focus on individual, personal memory highlights an increasing attention to the experience of the individual human subject. "Memory in the Lockean world is the foundation of consciousness," notes Margaret Anne Doody, and consciousness itself was understood as "the splendid flowering of humanity."[3] This emphasis on the uniqueness of human memory was also connected to the position of the imagination in understandings of human nature. As Alan Richardson notes, a "close alliance between memory and imagination" was a "key element" of eighteenth-century thought.[4]

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[2] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), ed. Peter N. Hiddich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 138-139.

[3] Margaret Anne Doody, "'A Good Memory is Unpardonable': Self, Love and the Irrational Irritation of Memory," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 14, no. 1 (October 2001): 67-68.

[4] Alan Richardson, "Memory and Imagination in Romantic Fiction," in *The Memory Process: Neuroscientific and Humanistic Perspectives,* ed. Suzanne Nalbantian, Paul M. Matthews, and James L. McClelland (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 281.

Wollstonecraft remarks on this connection between memory and imagination throughout her work, at times using the terms almost interchangeably. Throughout *A Short Residence*, she often draws attention to the intimate link between both qualities: "When a warm heart has received strong impressions, they are not to be effaced … and the imagination renders even transient sensations permanent by fondly retracing them."[5]

The connection between memory and imagination in eighteenth-century thought clarifies further the connection between human memory and human exceptionalism in writing from the period, given the valorised position of the imagination in understandings of human identity. For Wollstonecraft, the imagination is a key feature that sets humans apart from other animals, as important as reason in establishing human superiority. In a letter accusing her lover Gilbert Imlay of not having "sufficient respect for the imagination," Wollstonecraft declares that "I could prove to you in a trice that it is the mother of sentiment, the great distinction of our nature, the only purifier of the passions," alluding to imagination's prime position in marking humans as distinct from and superior to other animals.[6] She goes on to note that "animals have a portion of reason … but no trace of the imagination."[7] For Wollstonecraft, John Whale suggests, the imagination was "the unique hallmark of the divinity of the human mind, and that which makes us accountable creatures capable of improvement."[8]

The imagination is also key to Wollstonecraft's optimism about the future and her belief in human perfectibility. Critiquing Jean-Jacques Rousseau's pessimistic idealism early

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[5] Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark,* ed. Tone Brekke and Jon Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 39.
[6] Wollstonecraft to Gilbert Imlay, Paris, September 22, 1794, in *Collected Letters of Mary Wollstonecraft*, ed. Ralph M. Wardle (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 263.
[7] Wollstonecraft to Imlay, Paris, September 22, 1794, 263.
[8] John Whale, *Imagination Under Pressure, 1789-1832: Aesthetics, Politics and Utility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 90.

in *Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft asserts her distinction from Rousseau in terms of a personal temporal optimism: "Rousseau exerts himself to prove that all *was* right originally: a crowd of authors that all *is* now right: and I, that all will *be* right."[9] The distinction between Wollstonecraft's optimism and Rousseau's cynicism plays out in relation to their different assessments of the role of the imagination itself. While "Rousseau saw the pictures painted by the imagination as false possibilities causing human unhappiness, Wollstonecraft saw them as true possibilities that may motivate social change," notes Martina Reuter.[10] Examining how Wollstonecraft saw the evolution of the imagination itself as part of how humanity progressed over time, Whale describes how her "vision of progress" is intimately connected with her "vision of imagination as an expansive moral capacity."[11] Thus, for Wollstonecraft, "imagination plays a key role in keeping hope alive."[12]

However, the exalted position of the human imagination is not always assured in Wollstonecraft's writing. As Whale notes, "there are many instances when Wollstonecraft finds it difficult to sustain an optimistic vision of the progress of humanity."[13] It is in *A Short Residence*, Whale suggests, that this kind of dark speculation prompted by human mortality "manifests most prominently." [14] *A Short Residence* details Wollstonecraft's experiences travelling through Scandinavia on a mission to track down Imlay's missing spoils of war. Described by William Godwin as "a book calculated to make a man in love with its author," *A Short Residence* is thus itself ephemerally connected with Wollstonecraft's own future, and

[9] Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 17. (Emphasis is Wollstonecraft's.)
[10] Martina Reuter, "'Like a Fanciful Kind of Half Being': Mary Wollstonecraft's Criticism of Jean-Jacques Rousseau" *Hypatia* 29, No. 4 (Fall 2014), 929.
[11] Whale, 90.
[12] Whale, 68.
[13] Whale, 68.
[14] Whale, 94.

the birth of the future Mary Shelley.[15] In its own visions of the future, at times Wollstonecraft's trademark optimism about human perfectibility begins to seem less assured.

Some of Wollstonecraft's bleakest imaginings in *A Short Residence* are prompted by an encounter with human remains and a resulting reflection on human mortality. Visiting a "very old" church in Tonsberg, Wollstonecraft notes that it has "a gothic respectability about it, which scarcely amounts to grandeur."[16] Apparently in keeping with the church's lack of "grandeur" is a "little recess full of coffins" containing "bodies embalmed long since."[17] Being shown these "human petrifactions" prompts a confronting recognition of the bodily animality of human remains after life has been extinguished. "I shrunk back with disgust and horror," she notes, describing her response to what she sees as "treason against humanity, thus to lift up the awful veil which would fain hide its weakness."[18] This moment of bodily horror coincides with Wollstonecraft's specific reference to a lack of *grandeur* associated with human remains. "The grandeur of the active principle is never more strongly felt than at such a sight," she notes, "for nothing is so ugly as the human form when deprived of life."[19]

Wollstonecraft's reference to the "grandeur of the active principle" of human life recalls her earlier distinguishing between architectural "grandeur" and mere "gothic respectability." This association is further reinforced, as Wollstonecraft immediately goes on to compare this experience of witnessing preserved human remains unfavourably with the much more uplifting experience of viewing the ruins of human structures. "The contemplation of noble ruins produces a melancholy that exalts the mind," she declares,

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[15] William Godwin, *Memoirs of the Author of a Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) *Collected Novels and Memoirs of William Godwin*, Vol 1, ed. Mark Philp (London: Pickering and Chatto, 1992), 122.
[16] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 47.
[17] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 48.
[18] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 48.
[19] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 48.

outlining how this contemplation encourages "a retrospect of the exertions of man, the fate of empires and their rulers."[20] For Wollstonecraft, such contemplation of historical edifices also encourages an optimistic contemplation of the future, as "marking the grand destruction of ages" enables us to consider "the necessary change of time leading to improvement."[21] Viewing monuments of human greatness, Wollstonecraft suggests, helps us to contemplate the possibility of future progress. This contrasts strikingly with the awareness of human "littleness" that is "painfully brought to our recollection by such vain attempts to snatch from decay what is destined so soon to perish."[22]

This valorisation of "noble ruins" as evidence of past human greatness and inspiration for continual human perfectibility is gently undermined in Shelley's depictions of abandoned human edifices populated by animal life in *The Last Man*. Notoriously bleak in its depiction of humanity, *The Last Man* presents a "profound and prophetic challenge to Western humanism" that "charges humankind with the responsibility for its own downfall."[23] Relentlessly pessimistic in its assessment of human nature, the novel reads as a negation of the possibility of human progress and perfectibility – all human political systems fail and human society becomes only more corrupt, at the same time as a voracious plague decimates the global human population. As the plague inexorably quickens its assault on the human race, Shelley returns again and again to imagery of animals roaming freely through the devastated human world. Throughout Lionel Verney's account of the fall of man, he notes the frequent occurrence of "troops of horses, herds of cattle, flocks of sheep, wandering at will; here throwing down a hay-rick, … there having taken possession of a vacant cottage."[24]

[20] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 48.
[21] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 48.
[22] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 48.
[23] Kari E. Lokke, "The Last Man" in *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, ed. Esther Schor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 116; Lokke, "The Last Man," 118.
[24] Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Morton D. Paley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 224.

The plague limits human influence and enables animals themselves to develop new perspectives on humanity, with Lionel noting how "the animals, in new found liberty … hardly feared our forgotten aspect."[25] Having witnessed the deaths of the last of his companions, Lionel journeys to Rome alone. Exploring the Roman ruins, he notes how "sheep were grazing untended on the Palatine, and a buffalo stalked down the Sacred Way that led to the Capitol," and goes on, "I was alone in the Forum; alone in Rome; alone in the world."[26] His jump from a description of the animals that surround him to an emphatic declaration of his own aloneness figures animal presence as a furthering of human solitude.

The animals wandering boldly through the Roman ruins emphasise the uncanniness of abandoned human monuments; the apparent sacredness of these once sacred spaces is mocked by the material presence of grazing beasts. Meanwhile, the ideal of human perfectibility is undermined by Lionel's frequent reference to himself in dehumanising terms, describing himself as "a wild beast" and a "wild-looking … savage."[27] His apparent degeneration to a more animal-like state makes a mockery of the idea of the teleology of human progress. At the same time, monuments to past human greatness are useless for sustaining him through the loss of actual human companionship.

In *A Short Residence*, Wollstonecraft's own inclination to take solace from the ruins of human endeavour proves insufficient to fully combat the "disgust and horror" prompted by her witnessing of human remains. However, in her following letter she begins to tentatively seek a solution *within* her embodied reality. Her metaphysical musings continue, this time developing into a deeper reckoning with the animal qualities of human life. Describing how

[25] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 313.
[26] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 463.
[27] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 329; Shelley, *The Last Man*, 455.

she has been learning to row, Wollstonecraft dwells on a moment in which she allows her mind to wander in the peaceful rhythm of the boat's motion: "my train of thinking kept time, as it were, with the oars, or I suffered the boat to be carried along by the current, indulging a pleasing forgetfulness."[28] Forgetting her present reality, Wollstonecraft loses herself in a reverie about what awaits her after death:

> I cannot bear to think of being no more; … nay, it appears to me impossible that I should cease to exist, or that this active, restless spirit, equally alive to joy and sorrow, should only be organized dust.[29]

Building on the metaphysical angst of the previous letter, Wollstonecraft dwells deeply on human mortality, apparently reaching a point of spiritual crisis.

It is ultimately a renewed attentiveness to her physical surroundings and embodied reality that enables Wollstonecraft to emerge from this moment of existential despair. Concluding this paragraph with the wistful musing that "Surely … life is more than a dream," Wollstonecraft begins the next paragraph by firmly relocating herself as a physical presence within the waking world.[30] "Sometimes, to take up my oar, once more, when the sea was calm, I was amused by disturbing the innumerable young starfish which floated just below the surface," she notes. She describes these starfish in depth, noting how they "have not a hard shell," but "look like thickened water," evidently transfixed by these beings she "had never observed" before.[31] Following this detailed description, Wollstonecraft goes on to

[28] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 51.
[29] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 51.
[30] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 51.
[31] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 51-52.

mention that "I did not see any of the seals, numbers of which followed our boat when we landed in Sweden," reflecting that "though I like to sport in the water, I should have had no desire to join them in their gambols."[32] In returning to the physical reality of her present-day world, Wollstonecraft situates herself as one animal among many. The material world she returns to is revealed to be "more than a dream," and her detailed description of the fallible bodies of the starfish forms part of how she positions herself firmly back within her physical present.

There is a tension in this passage between Wollstonecraft's recognition of her own kinship with the varieties of animal life she finds herself surrounded by, and her desire to find in herself something more than animal. Her imagination is working doubly hard here. It is her human imagination that she hopes might position her as something more than "organised dust." Yet her instinctive imaginative engagement with the world around her, her sense of connection to other beings, works against this urge to claim a position of unique human sovereignty. This is further reiterated in the transition Wollstonecraft makes from this scene to a description of the human society of Tonsberg. Pulling further back into her immediate reality of writing the letter, she self-reflexively comments on her imagined reader: "Enough, you will say, of inanimate nature, and of brutes, to use the lordly phrase of man; let me hear something of the inhabitants."[33] Wollstonecraft's reference to the "lordly phrase of man" wryly undermines the notion that an analysis of human society should be of any more interest than the previous scene on the lake.

[32] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 52.
[33] Wollstonecraft, *Short Residence*, 52.

It is with a striking example of the "lordly phrase of man" that Shelley begins *The Last Man*. "So true it is, that man's mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister," Lionel declares at the beginning of his narrative.[34] Initially, this sentence seems to espouse an apparently typical Wollstonecraftian sentiment of human greatness and perfectibility – "man's mind alone" as creator of all that is "good or great." Yet there is a caveat – man's mind is only the creator of all that is good *to man*. The tiny qualifier, "to man," undercuts the apparent lofty sentiment of the sentence. Locating her protagonist within a world primed for its own fall, Shelley subtly emphasises a selfishly self-focussed quality of human nature. By the end of the novel, such grand statements of human progress have been revealed as false hubris. With the last man abandoned by other humans and forgotten by other animals, humanity itself has become a highly compromised ideal.

Yet in Lionel's state of extreme exceptionalism, he develops a new-found attentiveness to non-human animals in his attempts to find companionship in a world devoid of other humans. This attentiveness is clear in his description of an animal companion he encounters during his solitary wanderings through Rome, an animal itself specifically characterised by a capacity to remember. Noting how a year has passed while he has been writing his narrative, Lionel reflects that during this time "my only companion was a dog … whom I found tending sheep in the Campagna."[35] His description of the dog's behaviour when they first meet emphasises the animal's memory of humankind: "His delight was excessive when he saw me. He sprung up to my knees; he capered round and round, wagging his tail, with the short,

[34] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 9.
[35] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 467.

quick bark of pleasure."[36] Lionel's recognition of the dog's "bark of pleasure" is testament to the capacity of both animals to remember the possibility of interspecies kinship.

Lionel's canine companion is characterised by his memory in two different ways. Although the dog's master is dead, "nevertheless he continued fulfilling his duties in expectation of his return."[37] The dog's labours, Lionel reflects, are a "repetition of lessons learned from man, now useless, though unforgotten." Yet he ultimately decides to neglect this remembered duty in favour of his memory of humankind. As Lionel notes, "he left his fold to follow me, and from that day has never neglected to watch by and attend on me."[38] The dog's recognition of Lionel demonstrates a remembering of humanity as a species. The "forgotten aspect" of humanity has become meaningful again, but in a changed way; a specifically non-human understanding of the human species is referenced in this dog's memory of humankind.

The novel ends with Lionel and his canine companion preparing to leave Rome and set sail for other countries, seeking other survivors and possible companions. In deciding to leave the ruins of Rome, Lionel turns to the future – a future uncontained by the pages of the novel, as remembering dog and remembering man cast themselves forwards into the unknown. However tenuous the connection between them may be, there is a sense of possibility in Lionel's very recognition of the animal's recognition of him. The open-endedness of this final scene lends a tentative positivity to the unknown future ahead – a future at least partly informed by inhuman memories and imaginings.

[36] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 468.
[37] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 467.
[38] Shelley, *The Last Man*, 468.